

## **FOOD STAMP NUTRITION EDUCATION: THE VIEW FROM FNS**

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### **Introduction**

Good afternoon. I appreciate this opportunity to talk with you about food stamp nutrition education. You are important partners in making nutrition education a reality for food stamp recipients. This Fiscal Year, fifty-one State agencies, including the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands, have approved plans for delivering food stamp nutrition education.

The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) will reimburse about 50% of the planned expenditures; this amounted to more than \$190 million in Fiscal Year (FY) 2003.

Among the 94 implementing agencies to receive funds in FY04:

- 45% are the Cooperative Extension Services of individual universities;
- 18% are networks coordinated by a Cooperative Extension Service or another organization; and
- 37% are other individual organizations, like a Department of Health or Social Service Agency.

This is a particularly auspicious occasion for meeting with you. We are at a crossroads, in many ways, when it comes to food stamp nutrition education. The transition by FNS actually began several years ago with the strategic commitment to use the Food Stamp Program and other FNS nutrition assistance programs to promote both food security and healthy eating.

The Agency's mission is to provide children and needy families better access to food and a more healthful diet through both its food programs and nutrition education efforts. There is an ongoing effort to advance and integrate nutrition activity in all the FNS programs. The growth of food stamp nutrition education is an important part of meeting the mission.

There is much to commend about current operations. At the same time, there are key questions that are not easily answered, and lapses continue in the way basic parameters established by FNS are observed.

A recent performance assessment of the Food Stamp Program by the Office of Management and Budget, as part of the FY04 budget cycle, underscores the need to better design nutrition education. OMB concluded that the Food Stamp Program is better designed to reduce hunger and malnutrition, than to achieve further incremental improvements in the dietary status of low-income people. It required that USDA develop a plan for the use of Federal and state program funds to improve nutrition among food stamp participants.

### **Food Stamp Program Background**

Since FNS is moving to sharpen both the focus and accountability of food stamp nutrition education, I thought it worthwhile to spend a little time describing the broader Food Stamp Program; that is, the context, in which nutrition education operates. As you know, the impetus for creating the Food Stamp Program was to fight hunger and malnutrition by delivering food assistance to low-income families and individuals.

There is evidence of considerable success over the last 30 years, but hunger and food insecurity do remain real and persistent problems. In 2002, about 11 percent of all US households (12.1 million) were food insecure at least some time during the year because they did not have enough money or other resources. A majority (2/3s) of these households avoided hunger, in many cases by reducing variety in their diets, seeking emergency food assistance or participating in Federal food assistance programs. In about 3 percent of all US households (3.8 million), one or more people were actually hungry at some time during the year because they could not afford food.

A second point is that the Food Stamp Program touches the lives of millions of people. The Program is reaching over 23 million people each month. Unlike most other assistance programs, food stamp eligibility is not limited to specific groups or population segments. Benefits are available to nearly anyone with little income and few resources. In addition, the rules for determining eligibility and benefit amounts are national. The result is a nationwide safety net for low-income families and individuals regardless of where they live.

Even with this large number of recipients, many eligible persons do not participate. In September 2001, about 62 percent of those eligible for benefits received them. Participation rates vary substantially among different subgroups. While virtually all eligible TANF participants and nearly 80 percent of eligible children participate in the Program, only 40 % of eligible non-citizens and less than one-third (28%) of eligible elderly participate. Participation rates among low income workers is also of concern. Outreach is an important dimension of the Food Stamp Program as we work to ensure that all those in need have ready access to benefits and services.

It's important to point out that the Food Stamp Program responds to changing economic conditions in communities, states, regions and the nation as a whole. It automatically expands to meet increased need when and where the economy declines. It contracts as the economy grows. These counter-cyclical changes in food stamp expenditures have a stabilizing effect on both families and the economy. Not long ago, the Economic Research Service estimated that an additional \$5 billion in food stamp expenditures would trigger an increase in total economic activity of \$9.2 billion.

Good stewardship of public funds is also an essential part of Food Stamp Program management. For the most part, the Program delivers benefits only to households eligible to receive them. Payment error rates have improved in four consecutive years, falling to the lowest level in program history in 2002. About 94 cents of every food stamp dollar were delivered correctly that year. Only 2 percent of all participating households were ineligible for any benefit.

Perhaps of most interest to you is the Program's track record with respect to nutrition and diet quality. Research consistently shows that food stamp participation increases food expenditures and improves nutrient availability for a number of nutrients. Analysis of national food consumption survey data indicates that each dollar of food stamp benefits produces 17 to 47 cents in additional food purchases for the typical household. This increase is two to nine times greater than would occur if the same benefit were provided in cash. Further, food stamp households have access to more food energy, protein and an array of essential vitamins and minerals in their home food supply compared to eligible non-participants.

The story on diet quality, however, is mixed. By the mid-1990's, the nutrient intake of low-income persons looked quite similar to the intake pattern of higher income people - a sharp contrast from 40 years ago. However, dietary patterns among Americans generally are in need of serious improvement. Our consumption of calories, unhealthy fats and sugars is excessive. Intake of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains is modest. Such poor eating patterns contribute to making overweight and obesity a national health problem.

Food stamp recipients, like the low-income population in general, have a higher prevalence of health conditions related to poor nutrition than households with higher incomes. While obesity rates have doubled in children and tripled in adolescents over the last two decades, obesity has increased the most among those in the lowest income levels, especially African-American and Mexican-American low income children.

### **Nutrition Education the Vehicle to Improve Eating Behaviors**

We all recognize the importance of a healthy diet for normal growth and development, for reducing the risk of many serious diseases and generally for a productive life. Still, making healthy choices, on a consistent basis, eludes most of us. Delivering services to help improve the diet quality of FNS program participants is exceptionally challenging given the many constraints these individuals face.

That is why FNS is working to change the landscape of its programs. This effort is reflected in the Agency's strategic plan - in which quality nutrition is the goal for all programs. It is also apparent in the activity to promote integration and collaboration among the nutrition education efforts of different FNS programs. The Food Stamp Program, given its scope and potential reach, is key to our success.

Nutrition education is the most ready tool we have for making a difference. While there is no legislative requirement to provide nutrition education in the Food Stamp Program, most States do. Policy guidance for food stamp nutrition education has been elaborated in each of the last several years, but compared to other FNS programs, FSNE guidance is broad and flexible and has resulted in quite diverse programs.

There is great variation in proposed and reported activities both across and within States. This variety occurs with respect to audiences targeted, messages delivered, and educational approaches.

### **Challenges of Flexibility**

While the current flexibility in delivering food stamp nutrition education allows state and local services to vary with unique needs and circumstances, it poses some challenges and may limit the return on our joint investment to improve diet quality. From an FNS perspective, four issues stand out:

1. Misunderstanding continues about what constitutes appropriate activities for use of federal FS funds;
2. Nutrition education activities are not a recognizable part of the Food Stamp Program;
3. It is difficult to describe what nutrition education services are offered to whom; and
4. It is not possible to establish what results are being achieved.

I'd like to address, briefly, each of these challenges. FSNE policy guidance is modified annually in response to questions, problems, and suggestions identified during the preceding year. Everyone is encouraged to share ideas and recommendations for Agency consideration, and many of you have. FSP staff in our Regional Offices are charged with communicating FSNE guidance and reviewing plans, activities, and expenditures for consistency with that policy direction. Our Regional staff review draft versions of the annual guidance updates and raise questions about anything that is unclear. The goal is to apply this guidance uniformly.

Sounds straight forward, but I think we share the opinion that consistent policy implementation is difficult. From the FNS perspective, it is challenging to make sure plans are consistent with guidance and not otherwise inappropriate. The review of FY04 FSNE plans indicate several things of concern:

- Misunderstanding continues about the terms of exclusivity waivers. This is reflected in requests for a statewide exemption and plans to target non-recipients without requesting a waiver. One waiver request stated that, "Applicants are asked to provide information about their...current participation in other assistance programs, including food stamps.... However, food stamp participation or food stamp eligibility will not be a pre-requisite for participating in FSNE."
- The reasonable and necessary standard remains unclear in light of requests to purchase computers for food stamp households to access web-based training, travel to attend international professional meetings, and insurance on trucks used to deliver food to food banks.
- Understanding about the appropriate focus of FSNE nutrition education activities is questionable as demonstrated by requests to teach food safety to school food service workers, to pay the salaries of food safety

inspectors in restaurants or to deliver meals to homes.

- Direct educational services sometimes appear to take a back seat in light of the high proportion of administrative expenses. For example, justification is important when requesting reimbursement for a full-time supervisor responsible for 3-4 persons.

In addition to such errors of commission, there are numerous occasions where plans omit important information intended to document professional planning and decision-making. Plans are often missing one or more of the following:

- Explanations of how the target audience is chosen, what their particular nutrition education needs are, and how the proposed education fits their needs;
- Explanations of why existing educational materials are inadequate and what new materials are intended to provide;
- Evidence of behavior change or any positive outcome even though the same project has been funded for multiple years.

The second challenge, linking nutrition and educational efforts to the Food Stamp Program, is fundamental to the Agency's broad strategic mission. It can also support outreach efforts by improving the perception of the Program. However, research indicates this is not happening. Food stamp recipients participating in a set of recently conducted focus groups indicated that the Program isn't a resource for nutrition information.

The third FSNE challenge is our limited capacity to describe who is served, as well as what educational messages and services are provided. In fact, there are no sound numbers of how many persons or contacts are made. And, though food stamp nutrition education is intended to change the behavior of Program recipients, not a single state reported the number of food stamp recipient contacts in FY02 reports.

Such basic information is fundamental to effective administration and essential to accountability. It's worth noting that even for less visible components of the Food Stamp Program, whether its grants for employment and training services or waivers to eligibility rules for able-bodied persons without dependents, States routinely report the number of participants affected.

The fourth challenge that FSNE faces is determining whether and to what extent the desired results are achieved. Reasonable or not, we exist in an environment of performance driven decision-making. There are many obstacles to assessing diet-related behavior impacts, and these are shared by the entire nutrition education discipline. In general, the research indicates that to get relatively modest behavioral impacts an intervention must reach a sufficient level of intensity and duration before it can make a detectable difference. In addition, conducting impact evaluations with authoritative designs and sound outcome measures is a nontrivial undertaking. Most important, the investment in such research must always be weighed against directing limited funds to the intervention itself.

The constraints, however, don't relieve us of the responsibility of delivering science-based nutrition education. Instead, they make it critical that we use the credible research that is currently available in nutrition education and related fields. It also means, we have an obligation to pursue new research selectively in order to contribute meaningfully to the knowledge base. At a minimum this involves conducting research where the information pay-off is greatest, using strong evaluation methods, and sharing the results widely. Given the academic background and relationships that many of you have, this challenge seems like a great fit with your interests and talents.

I have spent some time talking about our obligations and opportunities to help address the challenges of food stamp nutrition education. The first and most important of these is building and implementing a meaningful and appropriate policy. I want to describe, now, some of the Agency's initiatives to meet these challenges.

### **FY05 FSNE Policy Guidance**

In response to the tight time frames that you face in preparing and clearing FSNE plans for submission to FNS, we have released our guidance for FY05 almost a month earlier than in the past. The 2005 Guidance is posted on the National Agricultural Library web-site ---

[http://www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp/National\\_FSNE.html](http://www.nal.usda.gov/foodstamp/National_FSNE.html)

The changes that you'll find address specific questions and issues that occurred during the last year. Alice Lockett with the Food Stamp Program will talk about the Guidance, a little later, in more detail. I see the changes, generally, falling into these categories:

- Emphasizing the importance and intent of certain FSNE policies. Examples include focusing on food stamp recipients and making exclusivity waivers the exception rather than the rule; relying on sound, existing educational materials whenever possible; and establishing USDA's royalty-free right to educational materials developed using program funds.
- Clarifying instructions for how to provide key pieces of documentation. For example, the guidance elaborates on methods for conducting needs assessments among the food stamp population and calls for linking the results to proposed interventions. A template for reporting FSNE projects is included that specifies elements to describe and a format for summarizing information.
- Establishing standards for collaborating with other FNS programs when FSNE activities intersect. These standards apply to breastfeeding promotion and school-based nutrition education.
- Providing electronic formats to reduce the burden of documenting state plans and to ensure key components are included.

- Anticipating future FSNE developments. Examples include eliminating multiple year plans and some data elements, given the revisions to FSNE policy that are anticipated in FY06.

### **Sharpening the Policy Framework**

At the end of this month, on March 30, FNS will kick-off an initiative to create a sharper, more focused policy framework for food stamp nutrition education. We expect the guiding principles that emerge from this effort will help accomplish several goals. These include focusing FSNE activities on national priorities, as well as identifying roles and responsibilities at federal, state, and local levels.

Substantively, our initial ideas include:

- increased targeting of on food stamp recipients,
- more focused messages
- more emphasis in the FSP on referrals for nutrition and health services,
- greater involvement on the part of food stamp administrators, and
- increased collaboration with other FNS programs.

The task is not an easy one, and FNS will begin with a round table discussion to which we've invited a diverse group of partners. As we continue the process, we will seek input from a broad range of stakeholders. Our current timeline calls for changes to be reflected in FSNE policy guidance for FY06.

### **Development of an Education and Administrative Reporting System**

As you can appreciate, one of our fundamental responsibilities for FSNE is to be accountable. Accountability, of course, takes different forms. One of them is to be able to describe who we are reaching, what and how we are teaching and how much it costs.

This would appear to be straight forward. However, when nutrition education is delivered through a very decentralized model and encompasses enormous diversity, the task becomes daunting. Although you provide a great deal of information in FSNE annual plans and reports, variations and gaps make it impossible to create a meaningful national picture.

Enter the Education and Administrative Reporting System, affectionately known as EARS. Last November, a working group, composed of FSNE program administrators, academics, food stamp program managers, FNS staff and other federal partners, began developing a reporting form to capture the profile of FSNE.

A draft, number umpteenth, of the form and instructions will be shared with an additional twenty reviewers during the next few weeks and some informal testing is expected. This summer, we plan to conduct a formal field test in 7-9 States. States

will be chosen to provide diversity on a number of relevant dimensions.

It is likely that many of you will have the opportunity to provide input in one way or another. Your feedback will be considered, so please don't pass up a chance to collaborate.

### **Food Stamp Nutrition Education Systems Review and Analysis**

EARS is the initiative that will allow us to collect basic information systematically and in an on-going manner. It is not intended to provide details on any topic nor to look at the reasons for specific decisions.

Last Fall, FNS awarded a contract to collect such information through a nationally representative descriptive study. This project is called the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Systems Review and Analysis, and is being conducted by Abt Associates and Health Systems Research.

Information will be collected next Fall through web-based surveys of all administrators of FSNE implementing agencies and state food stamp administrators. In addition, on-site interviews will be conducted at state and local levels in about 24 states. The data will be analyzed to provide a comprehensive and in-depth picture of what FSNE looks like on the ground and what factors influence the choices that are made.

The results will help inform all of us about what patterns exist and why. We appreciate the assistance that Helen Chipman has given to circulate quarterly updates on the study among FSNE stakeholders.

Participating in this substantial data collection will require you to share that scarcest of resources, your own time, as well as that of your staff. I believe you will find the return -- comprehensive and integrated information about food stamp nutrition education in your own state and others -- well worth the investment.

### **Support for Evaluation**

FNS is committed to encouraging and facilitating science-based nutrition education choices at all levels of decision-making. Our work plan for FY04 is intended to address some of the obstacles to making sound objective decisions. It includes producing:

- a user-friendly fact sheet, based on recent literature reviews, that summarizes what is currently known about effective nutrition education;
- a statement of principles for conducting sound impact assessments with links to available evaluation guides; and
- a checklist of model nutrition education features.

Our FY04 initiatives do not include conducting a federal impact assessment of food stamp nutrition education. Until there is a clearer national picture of FSNE, along with more focused policy priorities, the Agency will invest in tools to support strong



state and local impact evaluations.

### **Conclusion - Partnerships**

Partnerships are challenging, and the best ones experience some rough edges. We make the commitment to build and nurture them, however, because the larger, shared goals are so important, and because we can accomplish so much more if we have them. Thank you for your commitment to what promises to be an exciting partnership for food stamp nutrition education.